

About a year ago, Keren and I invited some good friends to our house for dinner. They are a delightful couple, and we love spending time with them. To our knowledge they do not attend church anywhere, so we told our kids before they came over, “There is a chance that we might not pray before dinner, because we don’t want our guests to feel uncomfortable. We’ll just feel it out as we go.” I thought that was simple enough. Dinner time comes, our friends are sitting at the table, our kids are sitting at the table, I walk into the dining room with the main dish, and I hear one of my kids say to our guests, “We know your secret.” “Oh yeah, what’s that?” “We know that you don’t love Jesus.” Welcome to the pastor’s house. Would you like some mashed potatoes?

How do you approach prayer in your life? Some people treat prayer as a formality before a meal. Some treat it as a last-minute option when all other routes have been pursued, when they are absolutely desperate. Others treat it as a crutch for the simple or the weak-minded. Some of you may have seen this video from Yellowstone a few weeks ago [watch the online sermon to see the video]. A tourist was watching a bison from what he thought was a safe distance. Well, the bison didn’t think it was a safe distance. A chase ensued. This was about the time that the prayer started. He’s ok! He’s healing. He’s telling jokes and laughing about it. He said, “Right here is where the prayers got really intense.”

Yes, we pray when we are in desperate need, and we pray before meals, and we pray to get guidance, but prayer is more than just those things. Prayer is a dynamic encounter with the God who governs the universe. Prayer pulls you closer in your relationship with God, and prayer moves the hand that moves the world.

We are in week two of our study of the book of Acts. For the next four months we are going to be learning about all the ways God moved in power in the early lives of Jesus’ followers—how he moved in power through the gospel, through the church, and through ordinary people. We are kicking off by learning how God moves in power through prayer. As we look at our passages from Acts 1 and 2, we are going to see three essential elements to prayer in the life of the church and of followers of Jesus.

Waiting in Prayer

In Acts 1:4, Jesus told his followers: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised.” Don’t make any moves until God moves first. What did they do while they waited? They prayed! “They all joined together constantly in prayer” (Acts 1:14). Rather than holding brainstorming meetings, or calling consultants, or staying busy with minor projects, they prayed. They didn’t get started with a plan and “hope” for God’s blessings. They prayed, and then they waited for God to move.

That’s challenging to us because our instinct is to move, to make progress, to gain traction, and hope that God will keep up with us. We’ll be at our house, on the phone, open Zillow, find a house that looks like it could be a good fit. We’ll check interest rates, see that they are still too high, see if the payment can fit in the budget, go check it out, fall in love with it, and make an offer. Then only after making an offer do we say, “God, if this is not your will, have them reject the offer.” Or, “God, if it’s not your will, have the inspector find black mold or termites.” Why are we wishing black mold and termites on people? The point is, how often do we get 95% down the hallway without prayer, and then at the last minute say, “God, don’t let this door open if you don’t want us to walk through it.” What we really should be saying is, “God, I won’t move until you move. Before we take a single step, before we make an initial plan, before we do anything, we want to stay in the center of your will.”

What are you waiting for right now, where God is asking you to pray in the waiting? Is it for a spouse? Is it for a child? Is it for healing? Is it for a promotion? Whatever you are waiting for, don't just wait; pray as you wait! Meet God in the waiting!

One of the most overlooked stories in the Bible about waiting in prayer is in the book of Daniel. Most people know the story of Daniel praying in his window when the king said anyone who did that would be thrown into the lion's den. They know about Daniel praying in the pit and the angels shutting the mouths of those lions. But do you remember the time when Daniel prayed and fasted for three weeks? After twenty-one days of continuous praying, an angel appeared to him. "Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them...But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me twenty-one days" (Daniel 10:12-13). Did you see that? God heard the prayer on day one. God heard and answered the first day. God knew what was going on. God had a response immediately. But just because there was an answer on day one doesn't mean Daniel had clarity on day one. There were other forces at work, spiritual opposition in the heavenly realms. Daniel, being so wise, didn't give up and stop praying after three days, or five days, or ten days; he kept waiting. He waited as long as he needed to, until his answer came. Praying and waiting takes faith. Praying and waiting takes trust. Praying and waiting takes patience. That's what God wants from us.

Unity in Prayer

"They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers" (Acts 1:14). It's not just that God's people prayed; they prayed joined together. They prayed in the same room, at the same time, with the same requests. I am 100% convinced that prayer in unity led to the unity of the early church. Praying has a unifying power that is impossible to come by any other way.

Keren and I have learned about this in our marriage. Like all couples, sometimes we have disagreements. When disagreements flair up, we each respond in ways that our personalities and our families of origin incline us toward. Every time a fight flares up, my basic instinct is to walk out of the room and ignore it, avoiding the conflict! On the other side, Keren hits fights head on. She's ready to debate and discuss and get to the bottom of it. Early in our marriage, we'd end up in a disagreement—not an intense fight, just a disagreement. After five or six minutes I would call timeout and say, "I think this is spiritual warfare." Keren would scoff and say, "This isn't about spiritual warfare; this is about you not doing the dishes!" I may have had a tendency of over-spiritualizing things. She may have had a tendency of under-spiritualizing things. One time we were in a deep disagreement and couldn't get on the same page. I didn't know what to do. I tried as hard as I could and I couldn't convince her that I was right! I left and walked to another room and started praying. I don't remember the exact word to that prayer, but I think I said something like, "God, just like the great Apostle Paul, I have a thorn in my side." I'm just kidding. I was praying for understanding. Praying for resolution. My prayer was interrupted when Keren opened the door and said, "Quit your praying. Come out here and fight me like a man." This is a true story!

It can be a good thing to pray by yourself if you are in a disagreement with your spouse. But what I have found is that when Keren and I aren't on the same page and we pray together, that's when it feels like a miracle happens. What we've discovered is that more arguing almost never leads to unity. More prayer almost always leads to unity. Now that's not to say that praying together is going to be easy. Quite to the contrary! When you are in a disagreement and you've been arguing for your side, and your intelligence or integrity has been questioned, and your pride is flared up, everything inside of you will resist stopping to pray, and especially stopping to pray with the person you are disagreeing with. But when followers of Jesus are willing to humble themselves and call on God, miracles can happen. What I've learned about marriage, friendship, church-life, you name it, is that division persists in God's family because prayer

doesn't. When people pray, and especially when people pray together, walls come down. When people who are in opposition to one another come together in prayer, God convicts people of their own sin, God humbles people in their own hearts. God ignites love in you for the other person. God reminds you of what really matters. You are reminded how desperate you are for the grace of God at the foot of the cross. When that happens, animosity melts, love grows, and unity emerges.

Direction in Prayer

The early followers of Jesus faced situations in which they did not know what to do. Their first instinct was not to rely on their ideas of ingenuity, but to seek God for his guidance. The prime example of this is in the replacement of Judas, the apostle who betrayed Jesus and then committed suicide in his anguish and shame. They had to figure out what to do in light of Judas' absence. This would be one of the most consequential decisions the apostles would ever make. After they narrowed it down to the two most qualified men, men who met each of the standards that were set, "They prayed, 'Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs.' Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles" (Acts 1:24-26).

The apostles knew they had to make a decision; someone had to fill the empty seat, so they prayed. They wanted God's will to be done, not their own. They wanted God's plan, not their preference. So they prayed, and then they cast lots, which likely looked something like putting two different colored rocks in a jar—if God led them to pick the white one, it would be Justus; if he led them to pick the black one, it would be Matthias. They wanted God to guide the process. To be clear, this is not an ongoing strategy for Christians making decisions. God, which college should I go to? Jar. Which job should I take? Jar. Should I do the dishes tonight? Jar? Acts 1 is the last time the Bible records the casting of lots, because what happened in Acts 2? God sent the Holy Spirit, who will be our helper, who will speak to us, convict us, guide us, lead us. We have the Holy Spirit to make things clear. They prayed and cast lots, but the central factor is that they didn't look to themselves or their preferences; they looked to God for direction after using wisdom to narrow it down between God-honoring choices.

We see this in the Old Testament as well. There was a time God's people were under incredible military threat (see 2 Chronicles 20). They heard that armies from all the surrounding nations were joining to attack them. They had a godly king at that time. When he heard word of this threat, his first reaction was not to summon his commanders or advisors. It was not to rally the troops or initiate a draft. His very first response was not only to pray himself, but also to have the entire nation pray together! "Jehoshaphat resolved to inquire of the Lord, and he proclaimed a fast for all Judah. The people of Judah came together to seek help from the Lord; indeed, they came from every town in Judah to seek him" (2 Chronicles 20:3-4). Crisis didn't drive them into panic; it drove them into God's presence. They went to pray, together! When they were all gathered in prayer, the king addressed the assembly and prayed an incredible prayer, concluding with these words: "'We have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.' All the men of Judah, with their wives and children and little ones, stood there before the Lord" (2 Chronicles 20:12-13). What do you think would happen in your marriage, in your family, in your life group, in your friendships, in our community, if every time there was a threat from within or a threat from without, you gathered together, you stood together before the Lord, joined hearts and voices in prayer, and said, "God we can't do this on our own. We don't have what it takes. We don't know what to do, but our eyes are on you." God, you show us the way.

Think about the example of Mary, the mother of Jesus. There was a time when Jesus and his mother were at a wedding and they ran out of wine. You get the sense that Mary was close to the family throwing the wedding, so she asked Jesus to help. Jesus said, "It's not my time." But Mary, being the earthly mother of the Son of God, just looked at the attendants at the wedding and said, "Do whatever he tells you" (John

2:5). They listened, and because they did what Jesus told them, they got to be a part of his very first miracle. In a way, this is the instruction to all of us. When we pray and we seek God's counsel and will, our posture needs to be, "Whatever you say, I will do."

We need to resolve and purpose that our default, every single time, is to seek God and obey God. I read an article this week about our increased reliance on artificial intelligence. AI has a lot of great purposes, but I think it's safe to say, some of them are a little overboard. There is a trend these days to people going on a first date, using their phone or their meta-glasses to record the entire date, and then going home, uploading the interaction from the date into AI, and asking AI if the person like them and what they should do next. Can you imagine your grandma's response when she asks you how the date went, and you say, "I don't know; the robot hasn't told me yet." That's not how we are supposed to live! Some of us have more confidence in predictive algorithms than we do in the Holy Spirit. God wants us seeking him above all else for our direction in life.

The earliest followers of Jesus committed everything they did to prayer. We see a picture of the life of the church in Acts 2:42: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." Prayer is part of what holds everything else in this list together. Here's how I like to think about it:

- Teaching without prayer becomes education.
- Fellowship without prayer becomes hanging out.
- Meals without prayer become dinner parties.

Prayer wasn't something they added on, and it wasn't just a pillar. It was integrated into their entire way of life. Why be devoted to prayer? Because devotion to prayer ensures that Jesus remains at the very center of everything we do. Before the church preached, they prayed. Before they healed, they prayed. Before they saw three thousand people saved, they prayed. Before God moved in power, they were already on their knees. Prayer was a part of everything they did, and God wants to the same to be true of us, too.

Today we'll end with time for prayer. Take a few minutes to connect with God, right where you are. Lean in on waiting for God, building relational unity, finding discernment, or committing to being devoted to prayer in your life.

Acts 1:12-26

12 Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city. 13 When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. 14 They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

15 In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty) 16 and said, "Brothers and sisters, the Scripture had to be fulfilled in which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus. 17 He was one of our number and shared in our ministry."

18 (With the payment he received for his wickedness, Judas bought a field; there he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out. 19 Everyone in Jerusalem heard about this, so they called that field in their language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) 20 “For,” said Peter, “it is written in the Book of Psalms: “‘May his place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in it,’ and, “‘May another take his place of leadership.’

21 Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us, 22 beginning from John’s baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection.” 23 So they nominated two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias. 24 Then they prayed, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen 25 to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs.” 26 Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles.